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TOL'ABLE DAVID

**THE WORKS OF
JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER**

NOVELS

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MOUNTAIN BLOOD [1915]
THE THREE BLACK PENNYS [1917]
JAVA HEAD [1918]
LINDA CONDON [1919]
CYTHEREA [1922]
THE BRIGHT SHAWL [1922]

SHORTER STORIES

WILD ORANGES [1918]
TUBAL CAIN [1918]
THE DARK FLEECE [1918]
THE HAPPY END [1919]

TRAVEL

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LA HABANA [1920]

NEW YORK: ALFRED A. KNOPE



yours sincerely,
Richard Barthelmess

TOL'ABLE DAVID

JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER



NEW YORK
ALFRED · A · KNOPF
1923

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TOL'ABLE DAVID

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I

HE was the younger of two brothers, in his sixteenth year; and he had his father's eyes—a tender and idyllic blue. There, however, the obvious resemblance ended. The elder's azure gaze was set in a face scarred and riven by hardship, debauch and disease; he had been—before he had inevitably returned to the mountains where he was born—a brakeman in the lowest stratum of the corruption of small cities on big railroads; and his thin stooped body, his gaunt head and uncertain hands, all bore the stamp of ruinous years. But in the midst of this his eyes, like David's, retained their singular tranquil color of sweetness and innocence.

David was the youngest, the freshest thing imaginable; he was overtall and gawky, his cheeks were as delicately rosy as apple blossoms, and his smile was an epitome of ingenuous interest and frank wonder. It was as if some quality of especial fineness, lingering unspotted in Hunter Kinemon, had found complete expression

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in his son David. A great deal of this certainly was due to his mother, a thick solid woman, who retained more than a trace of girlish beauty when she stood back, flushed from the heat of cooking, or, her bright eyes snapping, tramped with heavy pails from the milking shed on a winter morning.

Both the Kinemon boys were engaging. Allen, almost twenty-one, was, of course, the more conspicuous; he was called the strongest youth in Greenstream County. He had his mother's brown eyes; a deep bony box of a chest; rippling shoulders; and a broad peaceful countenance. He drove the Crabapple stage, between Crabapple, the village just over the back mountain, and Beaulings, in West Virginia. It was twenty-six miles from point to point, a way that crossed a towering range, hung above a far veil of unbroken spruce, forded swift glittering streams, and followed a road that passed rare isolated dwellings, dominating rocky and precarious patches and hills of cultivation. One night Allen slept in Beaulings; the next he was home, rising at four o'clock in order to take his stage out of Crabapple at seven sharp.

It was a splendid job, and brought them thirty-five dollars a month; not in mere trade at the

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store, but actual money. This, together with Hunter Kinemon's position, tending the rich bottom farm of State Senator Galt, gave them a position of ease and comfort in Greenstream. They were a very highly esteemed family.

Galt's farm was in grazing; it extended in deep green pastures and sparkling water between two high mountainous walls drawn across east and west. In the morning the rising sun cast long delicate shadows on one side; at evening the shadow troops lengthened across the emerald valley from the other. The farmhouse occupied a fenced clearing on the eastern rise, with a gray huddle of barns and sheds below, a garden patch of innumerable bean poles, and an incessant stir of snowy chickens. Beyond, the cattle moved in sleek chestnut-brown and orange herds; and farther out flocks of sheep shifted like gray-white clouds on a green-blue sky.

It was, Mrs. Kinemon occasionally complained, powerful lonely, with the store two miles up the road, Crabapple over a heft of a rise, and no personable neighbors; and she kept a loaded rifle in an angle of the kitchen when the men were all out in a distant pasturage. But David liked it extremely well; he liked riding an old horse after the steers, the all-night sap boilings

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in spring groves, the rough path across a rib of the mountain to school.

Nevertheless, he was glad when studying was over for the year. It finished early in May, on account of upland planting, and left David with a great many weeks filled only with work that seemed to him unadulterated play. Even that didn't last all the time; there were hours when he could fish for trout, plentiful in cool rocky pools; or shoot gray squirrels in the towering maples. Then, of evenings, he could listen to Allen's thrilling tales of the road, of the gambling and fighting among the lumbermen in Beaulings, or of strange people that had taken passage in the Crabapple stage—drummers, for the most part, with impressive diamond rings and the doggonedest lies imaginable. But they couldn't fool Allen, however believing he might seem. . . . The Kinemons were listening to such a recital by their eldest son now.

They were gathered in a room of very general purpose. It had a rough board floor and crumbling plaster walls, and held a large scarred cherry bed with high posts and a gayly quilted cover; a long couch, covered with yellow untanned sheepskins; a primitive telephone; some painted wooden chairs; a wardrobe, lurching in-

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securely forward; and an empty iron stove with a pipe let into an original open hearth with a wide rugged stone. Beyond, a door opened into the kitchen, and back of the bed a raw unguarded flight of steps led up to the peaked space where Allen and David slept.

Hunter Kinemon was extended on the couch, his home-knitted socks comfortably free of shoes, smoking a sandstone pipe with a reed stem. Mrs. Kinemon was seated in a rocking-chair with a stained and torn red plush cushion, that moved with a thin complaint on a fixed base. Allen was over against the stove, his corduroy trousers thrust into greased laced boots, and a black cotton shirt open on a chest and throat like pink marble. And David supported his lanky length, in a careless and dust-colored garb, with a capacious hand on the oak beam of the mantel.

It was May, school had stopped, and a door was open on a warm still dusk. Allen's tale had come to an end; he was pinching the ear of a diminutive dog—like a fat white sausage with wire-thin legs and a rat tail—that never left him. The smoke from the elder Kinemon's pipe rose in a tranquil cloud. Mrs. Kinemon rocked vigorously, with a prolonged wail of the chair

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springs. "I got to put some tallow to that chair," Kinemon proclaimed.

"The house on Elbow Barren's took," Allen told him suddenly—"the one just off the road. I saw smoke in the chimney this evening."

A revival of interest, a speculation, followed this announcement.

"Any women'll get to the church," Mr. Kinemon asserted. "I wonder? Did a person say who were they?"

"I asked; but they're strange to Crabapple. I heard this though: there weren't any women to them—just men—father and sons like. I drew up right slow going by; but nobody passed out a word. It's a middling bad farm place—rocks and berry bushes. I wouldn't reckon much would be content there."

David walked out through the open doorway and stood on the small covered portico, that with a bench on each side, hung to the face of the dwelling. The stars were brightening in the sky above the confining mountain walls; there was a tremendous shrilling of frogs; the faint clamor of a sheep bell. He was absolutely, irresponsibly happy. He wished the time would hurry when he'd be big and strong like Allen, and get out into the absorbing stir of the world.

II

HE was dimly roused by Allen's departure in the beginning brightness of the following morning. The road over which the stage ran drew by the rim of the farm; and later David saw the rigid three-seated surrey, the leather mail bags strapped in the rear, trotted by under the swinging whip of his brother. He heard the faint sharp bark of Rocket, Allen's dog, braced at his side.

David spent the day with his father, repairing the fencing of the middle field, swinging a mall and digging post holes; and at evening his arms ached. But he assured himself he was not tired; any brother of Allen's couldn't give in before such insignificant effort. When Hunter Kinemon turned back toward house and supper David made a wide circle, ostensibly to see whether there was rock salt enough for the cattle, but in reality to express his superabundant youth, staying qualities and unquenchable vivid interest in every foot of the valley.

He saw the meanest kind of old fox, and

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marked what he thought might be its hole; his flashing gaze caught the obscure distant retreat of ground hogs; he threw a contemptuous clod at the woolly-brained sheep; and with a bent willow shoot neatly looped a trout out upon the grassy bank. As a consequence of all this he was late for supper, and sat at the table with his mother, who never took her place until the men—yes, and boys of her family—had satisfied their appetites. The dark came on and she lighted a lamp swinging under a tin reflector from the ceiling. The kitchen was an addition, and had a sloping shed roof, board sides, a polished stove, and a long table with a red cloth.

His father, David learned, attacking a plateful of brown chicken swimming with greens and gravy, was having another bad spell. He had the familiar sharp pain through his back and his arms hurt him.

"He can't be drove to a doctor," the woman told David, speaking, in her concern, as if to an equal in age and comprehension.

David had grown accustomed to the elder's periods of suffering; they came, twisted his father's face into deep lines, departed, and things were exactly as before—or very nearly the same. The boy saw that Hunter Kinemon couldn't sup-

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port labor that only two or three years before he would have finished without conscious effort. David resolutely ignored this; he felt that it must be a cause of shame, unhappiness, to his father; and he never mentioned it to Allen.

Kinemon lay very still on the couch; his pipe, beside him on the floor, had spilled its live core, burning into a length of rag carpet. His face, hung with shadows like the marks of a sooty finger, was glistening with fine sweat. Not a whisper of complaint passed his dry lips. When his wife approached he attempted to smooth out his corrugated countenance. His eyes, as tenderly blue as flowers, gazed at her with a faint masking of humor.

"This is worse'n usual," she said sharply. "And I ain't going to have you fill yourself with any more of that patent trash. You don't spare me by not letting on. I can tell as soon as you're miserable. David can fetch the doctor from Crabapple to-night if you don't look better."

"But I am," he assured her. "It's just a come-back of an old ache. There was a power of heavy work to that fence."

"You'll have to get more to help you," she continued. "That Galt'll let you kill yourself and not turn a hand. He can afford a dozen. I

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don't mind housing and cooking for them. David's only tol'able for lifting, too, while he's growing."

"Why," David protested, "it ain't just nothing what I do. I could do twice as much. I don't believe Allen could helt more'n me when he was sixteen. It ain't just nothing at all."

He was disturbed by this assault upon his manhood; if his muscles were still a little stringy it was surprising what he could accomplish with them. He would show her to-morrow.

"And," he added impetuously, "I can shoot better than Allen right now. You ask him if I can't. You ask him what I did with that cranky twenty-two last Sunday up on the mountain."

His clear gaze sought her, his lean face quivered with anxiety to impress, convince her of his virility, skill. His jaw was as sharp as the blade of a hatchet. She studied him with a new surprised concern.

"David!" she exclaimed. "For a minute you had the look of a man. A real steady look, like your father. Don't you grow up too fast, David," she directed him, in an irrepressible maternal solicitude. "I want a boy—something young—round a while yet."

Hunter Kinemon sat erect and reached for his

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pipe. The visible strain of his countenance had been largely relaxed. When his wife had left the room for a moment he admitted to David:

"That was a hard one. I thought she had me that time."

The elder's voice was light, steady. The boy gazed at him with intense admiration. He felt instinctively that nothing mortal could shake the other's courage. And, on top of his mother's complimentary surprise, his father had confided in him, made an admission that, David realized, must be kept from fretting women. He couldn't have revealed more to Allen himself.

He pictured the latter swinging magnificently into Beaulings, cracking the whip over the horses' ears, putting on the grinding brake before the post-office. No one, even in that town of reckless drinking, ever tried to down Allen; he was as ready as he was strong. He had charge of Government mail and of passengers; he carried a burnished revolver in a holster under the seat at his hand. Allen would kill anybody who interfered with him. So would he—David—if a man edged up on him or on his family; if any one hurt even a dog of his, his own dog, he'd shoot him.

An inextinguishable hot pride, a deep sullen

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intolerance, rose in him at the thought of an assault on his personal liberty, his rights, or on his connections and belongings. A deeper red burned in his fresh young cheeks; his smiling lips were steady; his candid blue eyes, ineffably gentle, gazed widely against the candlelit gloom where he was making his simple preparations for bed. The last feeling of which he was conscious was a wave of sharp admiration, of love, for everything and everybody that constituted his home.

III

A LLEN, on his return the following evening, immediately opened an excited account of the new family, with no women, on the place by Elbow Barren.

"I heard they were from down hellwards on the Clinch," he repeated; "and then that they'd come from Kentucky. Anyway, they're bad. Ed Arbogast just stepped on their place for a pleasant howdy, and some one on the stoop hollered for him to move. Ed, he saw the shine on a rifle barrel, and went right along up to the store. Then they hired Simmons—the one that ain't good in his head—to cut out bush; and Simmons trailed home after a while with the side of his face all tore, where he'd been hit with a piece of board. Simmons' brother went and asked them what was it about; and one of the Hatburns—that's their name—said he'd busted the loony just because!"

"What did Simmons answer back?" Hunter Kinemon demanded, his coffee cup suspended.

"Nothing much; he'd law them, or something

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like that. The Simmonses are right spindling; they don't belong in Greenstream either." David commented: "I wouldn't have et a thing till I'd got them!" In the ruddy reflection of the lamp his pink-and-blue charm, his shy lips, resembled a pastoral divinity of boyhood. Allen laughed.

"That family, the Hatburns——" He paused. "Why, they'd just mow you down with the field daisies."

David flushed with annoyance. He saw his mother studying him with the attentive concern she had first shown the day before yesterday.

"You have no call to mix in with them," Kinemon told his elder son. "Drive stage and mind your business. I'd even step aside a little from folks like that."

A sense of surprised disappointment invaded David at his father's statement. It seemed to him out of keeping with the elder's courage and determination. It, too, appeared almost spindling. Perhaps he had said it because his wife, a mere woman, was there. He was certain that Allen would not agree with such mildness. The latter, lounging back from the table, narrowed his eyes; his fingers played with the ears of his dog, Rocket. Allen gave his father a cigar and lit one himself, a present from a passenger on the

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stage. David could see a third in Allen's shirt pocket, and he longed passionately for the day when he would be old enough to have a cigar offered him. He longed for the time when he, like Allen, would be swinging a whip over the horses of a stage, rumbling down a steep mountain, or walking up at the team's head to take off some weight.

Where the stage line stopped in Beaulings the railroad began. Allen, he knew, intended in the fall to give up the stage for the infinitely wider world of freight cars; and David wondered whether Priest, the storekeeper in Crabapple who had charge of the awarding of the position, could be brought to see that he was as able a driver, almost, as Allen.

It was probable Priest would call him too young for the charge of the Government mail. But he wasn't; Allen had to admit that he, David, was the straighter shot. He wouldn't step aside for any Hatburn alive. And, he decided, he would smoke nothing but cigars. He considered whether he might light his small clay pipe, concealed under the stoop, before the family; but reluctantly concluded that that day had not yet arrived.

Allen passed driving the next morning as
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usual, leaving a gray wreath of dust to settle back into the tranquil yellow sunshine; the sun moved from the east barrier to the west; a cool purple dusk filled the valley, and the shrilling of the frogs rose to meet the night. The following day was almost identical—the shadows swept out, shortened under the groves of trees and drew out again over the sheep on the western slope. Before Allen reached home he had to feed and bed his horses, and walk back the two miles over the mountain from Crabapple; and a full hour before the time for his brother's arrival, David was surprised to see the stage itself making its way over the precarious turf road that led up to the Kinemons' dwelling.

He was standing by the portico, and immediately his mother moved out to his side, as if subconsciously disturbed by the unusual occurrence. David saw, while the stage was still diminutive against the rolling pasture, that Allen was not driving; and there was an odd confusion of figures in a rear seat. Mrs. Kinemon said at once, in a shrill strange voice:

"Something has happened to Allen!" She pressed her hands against her laboring breast; David ran forward and met the surrey as it came through the fence opening by the stable shed.

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Ed Arbogast was driving; and a stranger—a drummer evidently—in a white-and-black check suit, was holding Allen, crumpled in a dreadful bloody faint.

"Where's Hunter?" Arbogast asked the boy.

"There he comes now," David replied, his heart pounding wildly and dread constricting his throat.

Hunter Kinemon and his wife reached the stage at the same moment. Both were plaster-white; but the woman was shaking with frightened concern, while her husband was deliberate and still.

"Help me carry him in to our bed," he addressed Ed Arbogast.

They lifted Allen out and bore him toward the house, his limp fingers, David saw, trailing through the grass. At first the latter involuntarily turned away; but, objurgating such cowardice, he forced himself to gaze at Allen. He recognized at once that his brother had not been shot; his hip was too smeared and muddy for that. It was, he decided, an accident, as Arbogast and the drummer lead Hunter Kinemon aside.

David Kinemon walked resolutely up to the little group. His father gestured for him to go

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away, but he ignored the elder's command. He must know what had happened to Allen. The stranger in the checked suit was speaking excitedly, waving trembling hands—a sharp contrast to the grim immobility of the Greenstream men:

“He'd been talking about that family, driving out of Beaulings and saying how they had done this and that; and when we came to where they lived he pointed out the house. A couple of dark-favored men were working in a patch by the road, and he waved his whip at them, in a way of speaking; but they never made a sign. The horses were going slow then; and, for some reason or other, his little dog jumped to the road and ran in on the patch. Sirs, one of those men spit, stepped up to the dog, and kicked it into Kingdom Come.”

David's hands clenched; and he drew in a sharp sobbing breath.

“This Allen,” the other continued, “pulled in the team and drew a gun from under the seat before I could move a hand. You can hear me—I wouldn't have kicked any dog of his for all the gold there is! He got down from the stage and started forward, and his face was black; then he stopped, undecided. He stood studying, with the two men watching him, one leaning careless

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on a grub hoe. Then, by heaven, he turned and rested the gun on the seat, and walked up to where laid the last of his dog. He picked it up, and says he:

“ ‘Hatburn, I got Government mail on that stage to get in under contract, and there’s a passenger too—paid to Crabapple, but when I get them two things done I’m coming back to kill you two dead to hear the last trumpet.’ ”

“The one on the hoe laughed; but the other picked up a stone like my two fists and let Allen have it in the back. It surprised him like; he stumbled forward, and the other stepped out and laid the hoe over his head. It missed him mostly, but enough landed to knock Allen over. He rolled into the ditch, like, by the road; and then Hatburn jumped on him, deliberate, with lumbermen’s irons in his shoes.”

David was conscious of an icy flood pouring through him; a revulsion of grief and fury that blinded him. Tears welled over his fresh cheeks in an audible crying. But he was silenced by the aspect of his father. Hunter Kinemon’s tender blue eyes had changed apparently into bits of polished steel; his mouth was pinched until it was only a line among the other lines and seaming of his worn face.

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"I'd thank you to drive the stage into Crabapple, Ed," he said; "and if you see the doctor coming over the mountain—he's been rung up for—ask him, please sir, will he hurry." He turned and walked abruptly away, followed by David.

Allen lay under the gay guilt in the Kinemons' big bed. His stained clothes drooped from a chair where Mrs. Kinemon had flung them. Allen's face was like white paper; suddenly it had grown as thin and sharp as an old man's. Only a slight quiver of the eyelids showed that he was not dead.

Hunter Kinemon sat on the couch, obviously waiting for the doctor. He, too, looked queer, David thought. He wished his father would break the dreadful silence gathering over them; but the only sound was the stirring of the woman in the kitchen, boiling a pot of water. Allen moved and cried out in a knifelike agony, and a flicker of suffering passed over his father's face.

An intolerable hour dragged out before the doctor arrived; and then David was driven from the room. He sat outside on the portico, listening to the passage of feet about Allen in a high shuddering protest. David's hands and feet were still cold, but he was conscious of an in-

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creasing stillness within, an attitude not unlike his father's. He held out an arm and saw that it was as steady as a beam of the stoop roof. He was without definite plan or knowledge of what must occur; but he told himself that any decision of Hunter Kinemon's must not exclude him.

There were four Hatburns; but two Kinemons were better; and he meant his father and himself, for he knew instinctively that Allen was badly hurt. Soon there would be no Hatburns at all. And then the law could do as it pleased. It seemed to David a long way from the valley, from Allen broken in bed, to the next term of court—September—in Crabapple. The Kinemons could protect, revenge, their own.

The doctor passed out, and David entered where his mother was bent above her elder son. Hunter Kinemon, with a blackened rag, was wiping the lock of an old but efficient repeating rifle. His motions were unhurried, careful. Mrs. Kinemon gazed at him with blanching lips, but she interposed no word. There was another rifle, David knew, in the long cupboard by the hearth; and he was moving to secure it when his father's voice halted him in the middle of the floor.

"You David," he said, "I want you to stop along here with your mother. It ain't fit for her

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to be left alone with Allen, and there's a mess of little things for doing. I want those cows milked dry, and catch in those little Dominicker chickens before that old gander eats them up."

David was about to protest, to sob out a passionate refusal, when a glimpse of his father's expression silenced him. He realized that the slightest argument would be worse than futile. There wasn't a particle of familiar feeling in the elder's voice; suddenly David was afraid of him. Hunter Kinemon slipped a number of heavily greased cartridges into the rifle's magazine. Then he rose and said:

"Well, Mattie?"

His wife laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Hunter," she told him, "you've been a mighty sweet and good husband." He drew his hand slowly and lovingly across her cheek.

"I'm sorry about this, Mattie," he replied; "I've been powerful happy along with you and all of us. David, be a likely boy." He walked out of the room, across the grass to the stable shed.

"He's going to drive to Elbow Barren," David muttered; "and he hadn't ought to have left me to tend the cows and chickens. That's for a woman to do. I ought to be right along with him facing

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down those Hatburns. I can shoot, and my hand is steady as his."

He stood in the doorway, waiting for the reappearance of his father with the roan horse to hitch to their old buggy. It didn't occur to David to wonder at the fact that the other was going alone to confront four men. The Kinemons had a mort of friends who would have gladly accompanied, assisted Hunter; but this, the boy told himself, was their own affair—their own pride.

From within came the sound of his mother, crying softly, and of Allen murmuring in his pain. David was appalled by the swift change that had fallen over them—the breaking up of his entire world, the shifting of every hope and plan. He was appalled and confused; the thoughtless unquestioning security of his boyhood had been utterly destroyed. He looked about dazed at the surrounding scene, callous in its total carelessness of Allen's injury, his haggard father with the rifle. The valley was serenely beautiful; doves were calling from the eaves of the barn; a hen clucked excitedly. The western sky was a single expanse of primrose on which the mountains were jagged and blue.

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He had never known the elder to be so long getting the bridle on the roan; the buggy was drawn up outside. An uneasy tension increased within him—a pressing necessity to see his father leading out their horse. He didn't come, and finally David was forced to walk over to the shed.

The roan had been untied, and turned as the boy entered; but David, at first, failed to find Hunter Kinemon; then he almost stepped on his hand. His father lay across a corner of the earthen floor, with the bridle tangled in stiff fingers, and his blue eyes staring blankly up.

David stifled an exclamation of dread, and forced himself to bend forward and touch the gray face. Only then he realized that he was looking at death. The pain in his father's back had got him at last! The rifle had been carefully placed against the wall; and, without realizing the significance of his act, David picked it up and laid the cold barrel against his rigid young body.

IV

ON the evening after Hunter Kinemon's burial in the rocky steep graveyard above Crabapple, David and his mother sat, one on the couch, the other in her creaking rocking-chair, lost in heavy silence. Allen moved in a perpetual uneasy pain on the bed, his face drawn and fretful, and shadowed by a soft young beard. The wardrobe doors stood open, revealing a stripped interior; wooden chairs were tied back to back; and two trunks—one of mottled paper, the other of ancient leather—stood by the side of a willow basket filled with a miscellany of housekeeping objects.

What were left of the Kinemons were moving into a small house on the edge of Crabapple; Senator Galt had already secured another tenant for the care of his bottom acres and fat herds. The night swept into the room, fragrant and blue, powdered with stars; the sheep bells sounded in a faintly distant clashing; a whippoorwill beat its throat out against the piny dark.

An overpowering melancholy surged through

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David; though his youth responded to the dramatic, the tragic change that had enveloped them, at the same time he was reluctant to leave the farm, the valley with its trout and ground hogs, its fox holes and sap boilings. These feelings mingled in the back of his consciousness; his active thoughts were all directed toward the time when, with the rifle, the obligation that he had picked up practically from his dead father's hand, he would walk up to the Hatburn place and take full payment for Allen's injury and their paternal loss.

He felt uneasily that he should have gone before this—at once; but there had been a multitude of small duties connected with the funeral, intimate things that could not be turned over to the kindest neighbors; and the ceremony itself, it seemed to him, should be attended by dignity and repose.

Now, however, it was over; and only his great duty remained, filling the entire threshold of his existence. He had no plan; only a necessity to perform. It was possible that he would fail—there were four Hatburns; and that chance depressed him. If he were killed there was no one else, for Allen could never take another step. That had been disclosed by the most casual

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examination of his injury. Only himself, David, remained to uphold the pride of the Kinemons.

He gazed covertly at his mother; she must not, certainly, be warned of his course; she was a woman, to be spared the responsibility borne by men. A feeling of her being under his protection, even advice, had grown within him since he had discovered the death in the stable shed. This had not changed his aspect of blossoming youth, the intense blue candor of his gaze; he sat with his knees bent boyishly, his immature hands locked behind his head.

An open wagon, piled with blankets, carried Allen to Crabapple, and Mrs. Kinemon and David followed in the buggy, a great bundle, folded in the bright quilt, roped behind. They soon crossed the range and dropped into a broader valley. Crabapple lay on a road leading from mountain wall to wall, the houses quickly thinning out into meadow at each end.

A cross-roads was occupied by three stores and the court house, a square red-brick edifice with a classic white portico and high lantern; and it was out from that, where the highway had degenerated into a sod-cut trail, that the future home of the Kinemons lay. It was a small somber frame

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dwelling, immediately on the road, with a rain-washed patch rising abruptly at the back. A dilapidated shed on the left provided a meager shelter for the roan; and there was an aged and twisted apple tree over the broken pump.

"You'll have to get at that shed, David," his mother told him; "the first rain would drown anything inside."

She was settling Allen on the couch with the ragged sheepskin. So he would; but there was something else to attend to first. He would walk over to Elbow Barren to-morrow. He involuntarily laid his hand on the barrel of the rifle, temporarily leaned against a table, when his mother spoke sharply from an inner doorway.

"You David," she said; "come right out into the kitchen."

There he stood before her, with his gaze stubbornly fixed on the bare floor, his mouth tight shut.

"David," she continued, her voice now lowered, fluctuating with anxiety, "you weren't reckoning on paying off them Hatburns? You never?" She halted, gazing at him intently. "Why, they'd shoot you up in no time! You are nothing but a——"

"You can call me a boy if you've a mind to,"

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he interrupted; "and maybe the Hatburns'll kill me—and maybe they won't. But there's no one can hurt Allen like that and go plumb, sniggering free; not while I can move and hold a gun."

"I saw a look to you that was right manlike a week or two back," she replied; "and I said to myself: 'There's David growing up overnight.' I favored it, too, though I didn't want to lose you that way so soon. And only last night I said again: 'Thank God, David's a man in his heart, for all his pretty cheeks!' I thought I could build on you, with me getting old and Allen never taking a mortal step. Priest would give you a place, and glad, in the store—the Kinemons are mighty good people. I had it all fixed up like that, how we'd live here and pay regular.

"Oh, I didn't say nothing to your father when he started out—he was too old to change; but I hoped you would be different. I hoped you would forget your own feeling, and see Allen there on his back, and me . . . getting along. You're all we got, David. It's no use, I reckon; you'll go like Allen and Hunter, full up with your own pride and never——" She broke off, gazing bitterly at her hands folded in her calico lap.

A new trouble filled David's heart. Through the open doorway he could see Allen, twisting on

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the couch; his mother was older, more worn, than he had realized. She had failed a great deal in the past few days. She was suddenly stripped of her aspect of authority, force; suddenly she appeared negative, dependent. A sharp pity for her arose through his other contending emotions.

"I don't know how you figure you will be helping Allen by stepping off to be shot instead of putting food in his mouth," she spoke again. "He's got nobody at all but you, David."

That was so; and yet——

"How can I let those skunks set their hell on us?" he demanded passionately. "Why, all Greenstream will think I'm afraid, that I let the Hatburns bust Allen and kill my father. I couldn't stand up in Priest's store; I couldn't bear to look at anybody. Don't you understand how men are about those things?"

She nodded.

"I can see, right enough—with Hunter in the graveyard and Allen with both hips broke. What I can't see is what we'll do next winter; how we'll keep Allen warm and fed. I suppose we can go to the County Home."

But that, David knew, was as disgraceful as the other—his own mother, Allen, objects of public charity! His face was clouded, his hands

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clenched. It was only a chance that he would be killed; there were four Hatburns though. His heart, he thought, would burst with misery; every instinct fought for the expression, the upholding of the family prestige, honor. A hatred for the Hatburns was like a strangling hand at his throat.

"I got to!" he said; but his voice was wavering; the dull conviction seized him that his mother was right.

All the mountains would think of him as a coward—that Kinemon who wouldn't stand up to the men who had destroyed Allen and his father!

A sob heaved in his chest; rebellious tears streamed over his thin cheeks. He was crying like a baby. He threw an arm up across his eyes and stumbled from the room.

V

HOWEVER, he had no intention of clerking back of a counter, getting down rolls of muslin, papers of buttons, for women, if it could be avoided. Priest's store was a long wooden structure with a painted façade and a high platform before it where the mountain wagons unloaded their various merchandise teamed from the railroad, fifty miles distant. The owner had a small glass-enclosed office on the left as you entered the store; and there David found him. He turned, gazing over his glasses, as the other entered.

"How's Allen?" he asked pleasantly. "I heard he was bad; but we certainly look to have him back driving stage."

"I came to see you about that," David replied. "Allen can't never drive again; but, Mr. Priest, sir, I can. Will you give me a try?"

The elder ignored the question in the concern he exhibited for Allen's injury.

"It is a cursed outrage!" he declared. "Those Hatburns will be got up, or my name's not Priest!

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We'd have them now, but the jail wouldn't keep them overnight, and court three months off."

David preserved a stony silence—the only attitude possible, he had decided, in the face of his patent dereliction.

"Will you try me on the Beaulings stage?" he repeated. "I've been round horses all my life; and I can hold a gun straighter than Allen."

Priest shook his head negatively.

"You are too light—too young," he explained; "you have to be above a certain age for the responsibility of the mail. There are some rough customers to handle. If you only had five years more now—— We are having a hard time finding a suitable man. A damned shame about Allen! Splendid man!"

"Can't you give it to me for a week," David persisted, "and see how I do?"

They would have awarded him the position immediately, he felt, if he had properly attended to the Hatburns. He wanted desperately to explain his failure to Priest, but a dogged pride prevented. The storekeeper was tapping on an open ledger with a pen, gazing doubtfully at David.

"You couldn't be worse than the drunken object we have now," he admitted. "You

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couldn't hold the job permanent yet, but I might let you drive extra—a day or so—till we find a man. I'd like to do what I could for Mrs. Kinson. Your father was a good man, a good customer. . . . Come and see me again—say, day after to-morrow."

This half promise partly rehabilitated his fallen pride. There was no sign in the men he passed that they held him in contempt for neglecting to kill the Hatburns; and his mother wisely avoided the subject. She wondered a little at Priest's considering him, even temporarily, for the stage; but confined her wonder to a species of compliment. David sat beside Allen, while the latter, between silent spaces of suffering, advised him of the individual characters and attributes of the horses that might come under his guiding reins.

It seemed incredible that he should actually be seated in the driver's place on the stage, swinging the heavy whip out over a team trotting briskly into the early morning; but there he was. There were no passengers, and the stage rode roughly over a small bridge of loose boards beyond the village. He pulled the horses into a walk on the mountain beyond, and was soon skirting the Galt

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farm, with its broad fields, where he had lived as a mere boy.

David slipped his hand under the leather seat and felt the smooth handle of the revolver. Then, on an even reach, he wrapped the reins about the whipstock and publicly filled and lighted his clay pipe. The smoke drifted back in a fragrant cloud; the stage moved forward steadily and easily; folded in momentary forgetfulness, lifted by a feeling of mature responsibility, he was almost happy. But he swung down the mountain beyond his familiar valley, crossed a smaller ridge, and turned into a stony sweep rising on the left.

It was Elbow Barren. In an instant a tide of bitterness, of passionate regret, swept over him. He saw the Hatburns' house, a rectangular bleak structure crowning a gray prominence, with the tender green of young pole beans on one hand and a disorderly barn on the other, and a blue plume of smoke rising from an unsteady stone chimney against an end of the dwelling. No one was visible.

Hot tears filled his eyes as the stage rolled along past the moldy ditch into which Allen had fallen. The mangy curs! His grip tightened on the reins and the team broke into a clattering

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trot, speedily leaving the Barren behind. But the day had been robbed of its sparkle, his position of its pleasurable pride. He saw again his father's body on the earthen floor of the stable, the bridle in his stiff fingers; Allen carried into the house. And he, David Kinemon, had had to step back, like a coward or a woman, and let the Hatburns triumph.

The stage drew up before the Beaulings post-office in the middle of the afternoon. David delivered the mail bags, and then led the team back to a stable on the grassy verge of the houses clustered at the end of tracks laid precariously over a green plain to a boxlike station. Beaulings had a short row of unpainted two-story structures, the single street cut into deep muddy scars; stores with small dusty windows; eating houses elevated on piles; an insignificant mission chapel with a tar-papered roof; and a number of obviously masked depots for the illicit sale of liquor.

A hotel, neatly painted white and green, stood detached from the main activity. There, washing his face in a tin basin on a back porch, David had his fried supper, sat for a while outside in the gathering dusk, gazing at the crude-oil flares, the passing dark figures beyond, the still obscured

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immensity of mountain and forest. And then he went up to a pine sealed room, like the heated interior of a packing box, where he partly undressed for bed.

VI

THE next mid-morning, descending the sharp grade toward Elbow Barren, there was no lessening of David's bitterness against the Hatburns. The flavor of tobacco died in his mouth, he grew unconscious of the lurching heavy stage, the responsibility of the mail, all committed to his care. A man was standing by the ditch on the reach of scrubby grass that fell to the road; and David pulled his team into the slowest walk possible. It was his first actual sight of a Hatburn. He saw a man middling tall, with narrow high shoulders and a clay-yellow countenance, extraordinarily pinched through the temples, with minute restless black eyes. The latter were the only mobile feature of his slouching indolent pose, his sullen regard. He might have been a scarecrow, David thought, but for that glittering gaze.

The latter leaned forward, the stage barely moving, and looked unwaveringly at the Hatburn beyond. He wondered whether the man knew him—David Kinemon? But of course he did;

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all the small details of mountain living circulated with the utmost rapidity from clearing to clearing. He was now directly opposite the other; he could take out the revolver and kill that Hatburn, where he stood, with one precise shot. His hand instinctively reached under the seat. Then he remembered Allen, forever dependent on the couch; his mother, who had lately seemed so old. The stage was passing the motionless figure. David drew a deep painful breath, and swung out his whip with a vicious sweep.

His pride, however, returned when he drove into Crabapple, down the familiar street, past the familiar men and women turning to watch him, with a new automatic measure of attention, in his elevated position. He walked back to his dwelling with a slight swagger of hips and shoulders, and, with something of a flourish, laid down the two dollars he had been paid for the trip to Beaulings.

"I'm to drive again to-morrow," he stated to his mother and Allen; "after that Priest has a regular man. I suppose, then, I'll have to go into the store."

The last seemed doubly difficult now, since he had driven stage. As he disposed of supper, eating half a pie with his cracklings and greens,

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his mother moved from the stove to the table, re-filled his plate, waved the paper streamers of the fly brush above his head, exactly as she had for his father. Already, he assured himself, he had become a man.

The journey to Beaulings the following day was an unremarkable replica of the one before. He saw no Hatburns; the sun wheeled from east to west at apparently the same speed as the stage; and Beaulings held its inevitable surge of turbulent lumbermen, the oil flares made their lurid note on the vast unbroken starry canopy of night.

The morning of his return was heavy with a wet low vapor. The mail bags, as he strapped them to the rear rack, were slippery; the dawn was a slow monotonous widening of dull light. There were no passengers for Crabapple, and David, with his coat collar turned up about his throat, urged the horses to a faster gait through the watery cold.

The brake set up a shrill grinding, and then the stage passed Elbow Barren in a smart rattle and bumping. After that David slowed down to light his pipe. The horses willingly lingered, almost stopping; and, the memory of the slippery

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bags at the back of his head, David dismounted, walked to the rear of the stage.

A chilling dread swept through him as he saw, realized, that one of the Government sacks was missing. The straps were loose about the remaining two; in a minute or more they would have gone. Panic seized him, utter misery, at the thought of what Priest, Crabapple, would say. He would be disgraced, contemptuously dismissed—a failure in the trust laid on him.

He collected his faculties by a violent effort; the bags, he was sure, had been safe coming down the last mountain; he had walked part of the way, and he was certain that he would have noticed anything wrong. The road was powerful bad through the Barren. . . .

He got up into the stage, backed the team abruptly on its haunches, and slowly retraced his way to the foot of the descent. There was no mail lying on the empty road. David turned again, his heart pounding against his ribs, tears of mortification, of apprehension, blurring his vision. The bag must have fallen here in Elbow Barren. Subconsciously he stopped the stage. On the right the dwelling of the Hatburns showed vaguely through the mist. No one else could

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have been on the road. A troubled expression settled on his glowing countenance, a pondering doubt; then his mouth drew into a determined line.

"I'll have to go right up and ask," he said aloud.

He jumped down to the road, led the horses to a convenient sapling, where he hitched them. Then he drew his belt tighter about his slender waist and took a step forward. A swift frown scarred his brow, and he turned and transferred the revolver to a pocket in his trousers.

The approach to the house was rough with stones and muddy clumps of grass. A track, he saw, circled the dwelling to the back; but he walked steadily and directly up to the shallow portico between the windows with hanging, partly slatted shutters. The house had been painted dark brown a long while before; the paint had weathered and blistered into a depressing harmony with the broken and mossy shingles of the roof, the rust-eaten and sagging gutters festooning the ragged eaves.

David proceeded up the steps, hesitated, and then, his mouth firm and hand steady, knocked. He waited for an apparently interminable space, and then knocked again, more sharply. Now

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he heard voices within. He waited rigidly for steps to approach, the door to open; but in vain. They had heard, but chose to ignore his summons; and a swift cold anger mounted in him. He could follow the path round to the back; but, he told himself, he—David Kinemon—wouldn't walk to the Hatburns' kitchen door. They should meet him at the front. He beat again on the scarred wood, waited; and then, in an irrepressible flare of temper, kicked the door open.

He was conscious of a slight gasping surprise at the dark moldy-smelling hall open before him. A narrow bare stairway mounted above, with a passage at one side, and on each hand entrances were shut on farther interiors. The scraping of a chair, talking came from the left; the door, he saw, was not latched. He pushed it open and entered. There was a movement in the room still beyond, and he walked evenly into what evidently was a kitchen.

The first thing he saw was the mail bag, lying intact on a table. Then he was meeting the concerted stare of four men. One of two, so similar that he could not have distinguished between them, he had seen before, at the edge of the road. Another was very much older, taller, more sallow.

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The fourth was strangely fat, with a great red hanging mouth. The latter laughed uproariously, a jangling mirthless sound followed by a mumble of words without connective sense. David moved toward the mail bag:

"I'm driving stage and lost those letters. I'll take them right along."

The oldest Hatburn, with a pail in his hand, was standing by an opening, obviously at the point of departure on a small errand. He looked toward the two similar men, nearer David.

"Boy," he demanded, "did you kick in my front door?"

"I'm the Government's agent," David replied. "I've got to have the mail. I'm David Kinemon too; and I wouldn't step around to your back door, Hatburn—not if there was a boiling of you!"

"You'll learn you this," one of the others broke in: "it'll be the sweetest breath you ever draw'd when you get out that back door!"

The elder moved on to the pounded earth beyond. Here, in their presence, David felt the loathing for the Hatburns a snake inspires—dusty brown rattlers and silent cottonmouths. His hatred obliterated every other feeling but a dim consciousness of the necessity to recover

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the mail bag. He was filled with an overpowering longing to revenge Allen; to mark them with the payment of his father, dead in the stable shed.

His objective senses were abnormally clear, cold: he saw every detail of the Hatburns' garb—the soiled shirts with buttoned pockets on their left breasts; the stained baggy breeches in heavy boots—such boots as had stamped Allen into nothingness; dull yellow faces and beady eyes; the long black hair about their dark ears.

The idiot thrust his fingers into his loose mouth, his shirt open on a hairy pendulous chest. The Hatburn who had not yet spoken showed a row of tobacco-brown broken teeth.

“He mightn't get a heave on that breath,” he asserted. The latter lounged over against a set of open shelves where, David saw, lay a heavy rusted revolver. Hatburn picked up the weapon and turned it slowly in his thin grasp.

“I'm carrying the mail,” David repeated, his hand on the bag. “You've got no call on this or on me.”

He added the last with tremendous effort. It seemed unspeakable that he should be there, the Hatburns before him, and merely depart.

“What do you think of putting the stage under

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a soft little strawberry like that?" the other inquired.

For an answer there was a stunning report, a stinging odor of saltpeter; and David felt a sharp burning on his shoulder, followed by a slow warmish wet, spreading.

"I didn't go to do just that there!" the Hatburn who had fired explained. "I wanted to clip his ear, but he twitched like."

David picked up the mail bag and took a step backward in the direction he had come. The other moved between him and the door.

"If you get out," he said, "it'll be through the hog-wash."

David placed the bag on the floor, stirred by a sudden realization—he had charge of the stage, official responsibility for the mail. He was no longer a private individual; what his mother had commanded, entreated, had no force here and now. The Hatburns were unlawfully detaining him.

As this swept over him, a smile lighted his fresh young cheeks, his frank mouth, his eyes like innocent flowers. Hatburn shot again; this time the bullet flicked at David's old felt hat. With his smile lingering he smoothly leveled the revolver from his pocket and shot the mocking

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figure in the exact center of the pocket patched on his left breast.

David wheeled instantly, before the other Hatburn running for him, and stopped him with a bullet as remorselessly placed as the first. The two men on the floor stiffened grotesquely and the idiot crouched in a corner, whimpering.

David passed his hand across his brow; then he bent and grasped the mail bag. He was still pausing when the remaining Hatburn strode into the kitchen. The latter whispered a sharp oath. David shifted the bag; but the elder had him before he could bring the revolver up. A battering blow fell, knocked the pistol clattering over the floor, and David instinctively clutched the other's wrist.

The blows multiplied, beating David into a daze, through which a single realization persisted—he must not lose his grip upon the arm that was swinging him about the room, knocking over chairs, crashing against the table, even drawing him across the hot iron of the stove. He must hold on!

He saw the face above him dimly through the deepening mist; it seemed demoniacal, inhuman, reaching up to the ceiling—a yellow giant bent on his destruction. . . .

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His mother, years ago, lives away, had read to them—to his father and Allen and himself—about a giant, a giant and David; and in the end——

He lost all sense of the entity of the man striving to break him against the wooden angles of the room; he had been caught, was twisting, in a great storm; a storm with thunder and cruel flashes of lightning; a storm hammering and hammering at him. . . . Must not lose his hold on—on life! He must stay fast against everything! It wasn't his hand gripping the destructive force towering above him, but a strange quality within him, at once within him and aside, burning in his heart and directing him from without.

The storm subsided; out of it emerged the livid face of Hatburn; and then, quite easily, he pitched David back across the floor. He lay there a moment and then stirred, partly rose, beside the mail bag. His pistol was lying before him; he picked it up.

The other was deliberately moving the dull barrel of a revolver up over his body. A sharp sense of victory possessed David, and he whispered his brother's name. Hatburn fired—uselessly. The other's battered lips smiled. Go-

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liath, that was the giant's name. He shot easily, securely—once.

Outside, the mail bag seemed weighted with lead. He swayed and staggered over the rough declivity to the road. It required a superhuman effort to heave the pack into the stage. The strap with which he had hitched the horses had turned into iron. At last it was untied. He clambered up to the enormous height of the driver's seat, unwrapped the reins from the whipstock, and the team started forward.

He swung to the lurching of the stage like an inverted pendulum; darkness continually thickened before his vision; waves of sickness swept up to his head. He must keep the horses on the road, forward the Government mail!

A grim struggle began between his beaten flesh, a terrible weariness, and that spirit which seemed to be at once a part of him and a voice. He wiped the blood from his young brow; from his eyes miraculously blue like an ineffable May sky.

"Just a tol'able David," he muttered weakly—"only just tol'able!"

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